

New York State Principals
New York State's High Schools, Middle Schools and Elementary Schools

*An Open Letter to Parents of Children throughout New York State
Regarding Grade 3-8 Testing*

www.newyorkprincipals.org

Dear Parents,

We are the principals of your children's schools. We serve communities in every corner of New York State — from Niagara County to Clinton, Chautauqua to Suffolk. We come from every size and type of school, with students from every background. We thank you for sharing your children with us and for entrusting us to ensure that they acquire the skills and knowledge they need to achieve their dreams and your hopes for them.

This year, many of your children experienced the first administration of the newly revised New York State Assessments. You may have heard that teachers, administrators, and parents are questioning the validity of these tests. As dedicated administrators, we have carefully observed the testing process and have learned a great deal about these tests and their impact. We care deeply about your children and their learning and want to share with you what we know — and what we do not know — about these new state assessments.

Here's what we know:

- 1) **NYS Testing Has Increased Dramatically:** We know that our students are spending more time taking State tests than ever before. Since 2010, the amount of time spent on average taking the 3-8 ELA and Math tests has increased by a whopping 128%! The increase has been particularly hard on our younger students, with third graders seeing an increase of 163%!
- 2) **The Tests were Too Long:** We know that many students were unable to complete the tests in the allotted time. Not only were the tests lengthy and challenging, but embedded field test questions extended the length of the tests and caused mental exhaustion, often before students reached the questions that counted toward their scores. For our Special Education students who receive additional time, these tests have become more a measure of endurance than anything else.
- 3) **Ambiguous Questions Appeared throughout the Exams:** We know that many teachers and principals could not agree on the correct answers to ambiguous questions in both ELA and Math. In some schools, identical passages and questions appeared on more than one test and at more than one grade level. One school reported that on one day of the ELA Assessment, the same passage with identical questions was included in the third, fourth AND fifth grade ELA Assessments.
- 4) **Children have Reacted Viscerally to the Tests:** We know that many children cried during or after testing, and others vomited or lost control of their bowels or bladders. Others simply gave up. One teacher reported that a student kept banging his head on the desk, and wrote, "This is too hard," and "I can't do this," throughout his test booklet.
- 5) **The Low Passing Rate was Predicted:** We know that in his "Implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards" memo of March 2013, Deputy Commissioner Slentz stated that proficiency scores (i.e., passing rate) on the new assessments would range between 30%-37% statewide. When scores were released in August 2013, the statewide proficiency rate was announced as 31%.

- 6) **The College Readiness Benchmark is Irresponsibly Inflated:** We know that the New York State Education Department used SAT scores of 560 in Reading, 540 in Writing and 530 in mathematics, as the college readiness benchmarks to help set the “passing” cut scores on the 3-8 New York State exams. These NYSED scores, totaling 1630, are far higher than the College Board’s own college readiness benchmark score of 1550. By doing this, NYSED has carelessly inflated the “college readiness” proficiency cut scores for students as young as nine years of age.
- 7) **State Measures are Contradictory:** We know that many children are receiving scores that are not commensurate with the abilities they demonstrate on other measures, particularly the New York State Integrated Algebra Regents examination. Across New York, many accelerated eighth-graders scored below proficiency on the eighth grade test only to go on and excel on the Regents examination one month later. One district reports that 58% of the students who scored below proficiency on the NYS Math 8 examination earned a mastery score on the Integrated Algebra Regents.
- 8) **Students Labeled as Failures are Forced Out of Classes:** We know that many students who never needed Academic Intervention Services (AIS) in the past, are now receiving mandated AIS as a result of the failing scores. As a result, these students are forced to forgo enrichment classes. For example, in one district, some middle school students had to give up instrumental music, computer or other special classes in order to fit AIS into their schedules.
- 9) **The Achievement Gap is Widening:** We know that the tests have caused the achievement gap to widen as the scores of economically disadvantaged students plummeted, and that parents are reporting that low-scoring children feel like failures.
- 10) **The Tests are Putting Financial Strains on Schools:** We know that many schools are spending precious dollars on test prep materials, and that instructional time formerly dedicated to field trips, special projects, the arts and enrichment, has been reallocated to test prep, testing, and AIS services.
- 11) **The Tests are Threatening Other State Initiatives:** Without a doubt, the emphasis on testing is threatening other important State initiatives, most notably the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Parents who see the impact of the testing on their children are blaming the CCSS, rather than the unwise decision to implement high stakes testing before proper capacity had been developed. As long as these tests remain, it will be nearly impossible to have honest conversations about the impact of the CCSS on our schools.

Here’s what we do not know:

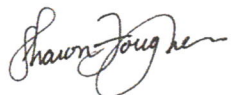

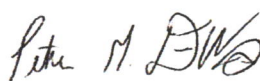
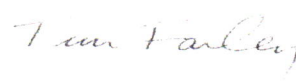
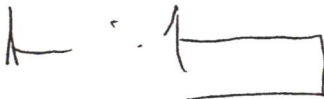

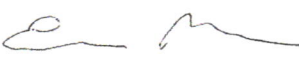

- 1) **How these Tests will Help our Students:** With the exception of select questions released by the state, we do not have access to the test questions. Without access to the questions, it is nearly impossible to use the tests to help improve student learning.
- 2) **How to Use these Tests to Improve Student Skills or Understanding:** Tests should serve as a tool for assessing student skills and understanding. Since we are not informed of the make-up of the tests, we do not know, with any level of specificity, the content or skills for which children require additional support. We do not even know how many points were allotted for each question.
- 3) **The Underlying Cause of Low Test Scores:** We do not know if children’s low test scores are actually due to lack of skills in that area or simply a case of not finishing the test — a problem that plagued many students.

- 4) **What to Expect Next Year:** We do not know what to expect for next year. Our students are overwhelmed by rapidly changing standards, curriculum and assessments. It is nearly impossible to serve and protect the students in our care when expectations are in constant flux and put in place rapidly in a manner that is not reflective of sound educational practice.
- 5) **How Much this is Costing Already-Strained Taxpayers:** We don't know how much public money is being paid to vendors and corporations that the NYSED contracts to design assessments, nor do we know if the actual designers are educationally qualified.

Please know that we, your school principals, care about your children and will continue to do everything in our power to fill their school days with learning that is creative, engaging, challenging, rewarding and joyous. We encourage you to dialogue with your child's teachers so that you have real knowledge of his skills and abilities across all areas. If your child scored poorly on the test, please make sure that he does not internalize feelings of failure. We believe that the failure was not on the part of our children, but rather with the officials of the New York State Education Department. These are the individuals who chose to recklessly implement numerous major initiatives without proper dialogue, public engagement or capacity building. They are the individuals who have failed.

As principals of New York schools, it is always our goal to move forward in a constant state of improvement. Under current conditions, we fear that the hasty implementation of unpiloted assessments will continue to cause more harm than good. Please work with us to preserve a healthy learning environment for our children and to protect all of the unique varieties of intelligence that are not reducible to scores on standardized tests. Your child is so much more than a test score, and we know it.

Warmly,

Sharon Fougner  Principal, E.M. Baker Elementary	Carol Burris, Ed.D.  Principal, South Side High School	Peter DeWitt, Ed.D.  Principal, Poestenkill Elementary	Tim Farley  Principal, Ichabod Crane Middle School
Sean C. Feeney, Ph.D.  Principal, The Wheatley School	Andrew Greene  Principal, Candlewood Middle School	Elizabeth Phillips  Principal, P.S. 321	Katie Zahedi, Ph.D.  Principal, Linden Avenue Middle School